

*Cosmic Indifference
in the Anthropocene*

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Cosmic Indifference in the Anthropocene

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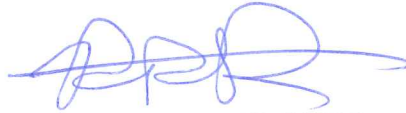
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Humanity historically seeks order from chaos by striving to control natural forces; nevertheless, the observable universe teems with uncertainty, indifference, and disorder. My multimedia thesis work depicts confrontations between humanity and both natural and supernatural entities and forces, as well as examines the implications of cosmic indifference, alternatively called cosmicism: a philosophical and literary ideology wherein humankind exists at the mercy of ambivalent, and often cruel, machinations of nature. I synthesize disparate media to create cut-paper collages, experimental films, sculptural assemblages, and immersive installations designed to unsettle and transfix my audience, ultimately in pursuit of existential encounters and active engagements which transcend passive art spectatorship.

Influences

As a multimedia artist, I actively explore all forms of creative expression. I attended film school from 2007 to 2009, during which time I developed a deep love of experimental film. Much of the visual and thematic elements encompassing my multimedia work is informed by avant-garde filmmakers including Stan Brakhage, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Kenneth Anger, all of whom appropriate visceral, archetypal, and surreal imagery in their films. I'm influenced by Jodorowsky's and Anger's psychedelic imagery and re-contextualized use of found footage, as well as Brakhage's tactile manipulation of celluloid. My aesthetic is further informed by the work of Hieronymus Bosch, Luigi Serafini, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dali, as well as that of collagist Larry Carlson and photographer Steven Arnold; Ernst's and Dali's surreal utilization of archetypes and symbolism relates directly to my central themes, while Arnold's and Carlson's hyper-detailed, hallucinatory bombardment of imagery helps inform my visual aesthetic.

In 2010, I discovered a passion for analogue/hand-cut paper collaging. My collage process is lengthy and deeply involved; I will spend months gathering ideal imagery for a given piece. I'm drawn towards the meticulous process of amassing found imagery via books and magazines, and the ensuing tactile procedure of cutting, layering, and gluing. Although I work across a diverse array of mediums, my artwork shares common formative geneses. In my experimental films, cut-paper collages, immersive installations, and sculptural assemblage work, I combine found imagery and physical objects into unified themes and narratives. I let my pieces develop organically, mining from a pool of collected visual data, synthesizing archetypal material with conscious intent.



(My typical collage-making workspace)

The repetitive, ritualized processes of layering and visual abstraction involved in collage-making, experimental filmmaking, and sculptural assemblage is innately meditative, resulting in a slipstream of creative outpour commonly referred to as “flow.” This “flow” state of making is described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as “the complete

absorption of self in a given creative task,” and has been observed for millennia.¹ The transcendental aspect of art-making, wherein the whole of one’s consciousness is unified by creative activity, is vital to my cosmic/universal themes and aesthetic; the “flow” signifies the transcendental core of creative self-expression.

Just as Csikszentmihalyi describes the self-harmonizing of “flow” in regards to the artist/creator, writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley explores the receptive awareness of the viewer/receiver. I hope to elicit an intimate connection with viewers of my work by targeting what Huxley dubbed “the mind’s antipodes”: a receptive, hyper-aware consciousness lying latent in people’s day-to-day cognizance.² Huxley theorized that humans naturally evolved a sensory filter of conscious awareness in order to function in rational society; my multimedia work is meant to trigger a rush of overwhelming sensory data in hopes of flushing clean this filter, inviting affectation through a primal/childlike lens of pure wonder. This unaffected cognizance – Huxley’s proposed “Mind at Large” - is closely aligned with dialectical phenomenology as espoused by philosophers Georg Hegel and Edmund Husserl; Husserl’s conceptualization in particular concerns the “reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.”³ This “essence of consciousness” explored by Husserl is the ideal affectation for viewers of my work: an awareness that is existential and wholly unfiltered.

Confrontations with Observable Nature

In my two-dimensional cut-paper collage work, wherein I retain precise control over manipulation of imagery, I frequently employ concepts related to Freud’s notion of the

¹ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (Harper Classics, 1990), 10-20.

² Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell*. (Chatto & Windus, 1954), 6-8.

³ Smith, David Woodruff. *Husserl (The Routledge Philosophers)*. (Routledge, 2007), 38-30.

uncanny and Shklovsky's writing on defamiliarization: both vital methods for affecting viewership through the combination of strange and familiar iconography. "Uncanny" imagery is described as being eerily familiar despite inherent strangeness, consisting of unusual forms with familiar aspects - thereby anchoring the viewer to recognizable reality - while "defamiliarized" imagery seeks instead to create alienation via holistic visual disfigurement, in order to, as Shklovsky explains, "increase difficulty and length of perception."⁴

My cut-paper collages "Strange Love" and "The Dissected Goddess" depict the "uncanny" merging with and infestation of human bodies by natural entities.



("Strange Love (cut-paper collage with artificial blood, 14"x22", 2017,"
"The Dissected Goddess" (cut-paper collage, epoxy resin, ink, medical tray, scalpel, 6"x8", 2016)

In these collages, unnatural forms are comprised of assorted recognizable visual elements, the base components of which are at turns bacterial, geological, animal, and floral

⁴ Newton, K.M. (ed.) *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. (Macmillian Education UK, 1997), 16.

in nature. Although disparate in material origin, these components resemble familiar anatomical structures - for example, in “Strange Love,” a parasite resembles an arm muscle, a fungus resembles cancerous tumors, etc. The viewer accordingly reads these alien forms as biological entities, although they are decidedly uncanny, “being both strange and familiar.”⁵ The desired affectation is that of unsettling the viewer while simultaneously presenting them with comfortingly familiar imagery; these once-human forms and their respective human flesh have been uncannily transmuted by invasive natural growth existing beyond the realm of rational understanding.

In these same pieces I also utilize defamiliarization, wherein familiar forms have purposefully been made strange or transfigured. This visual obstacle results in an uncomfortable, lingering gaze, as the viewer seeks to make rational sense of disconnected/re-contextualized iconography.⁶ For example, in “The Dissected Goddess,” valves of the human heart serve as arms for the eponymous, otherworldly creature; in “Strange Love,” the massive, amorphously cerebral growth of one creature’s head is in fact comprised of a budding plant. By way of defamiliarization, the familiar and natural is made wholly alien, unrecognizable, and strangeness prevails.

My cut-paper collage series “Infestatio Natura” similarly depicts the infestation of human anatomy by natural elements, but instead of featuring holistic, grotesque subjects, there exists a stark contrast between objectively human body parts as passive subjects and floral/animal/geological elements as invasive, active objects. In this series, the confrontation between humanity and nature is insidious: insects burrow in the brain; mineral formations obfuscate internal organs; plant life pierces through muscle and veins. This parasitic dynamic

⁵ Freud, S. *The Uncanny*. (London: Vintage, 1919), 2-3.

⁶ Newton, K.M. (ed.) *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. (Macmillan Education UK, 1997,) 18.

between mankind and nature relates to my core theme of cosmic indifference, popularized by writer H.P. Lovecraft and further explored by contemporary philosophers including Eugene Thacker, Thomas Ligotti, and Peter Zapffe.



(*"The Mind"* (cut-paper collage, 9"x4", 2016) and *"The Spirit"* (cut-paper collage, 4"x7", 2016) from the series *"Infestatio Natura"* (2016))

Although first brought into the public consciousness by the horror writing of Lovecraft in the 1920s, cosmicism is philosophically rooted in Karl Marx's dialectical materialism of the 1840s, which examines the interwoven harmonies and disharmonies between man and nature as well as the evolution of natural phenomena. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx posits that man's industrial achievement and domination of nature has dangerously displaced his vital, primordial connection to the natural world, claiming "nature is man's inorganic body...as the products of the worker's labor are expropriated, nature is reduced to a mere means of subsistence...the immediacy of nature has been lost, and nature confronts humanity as an alien, unknown entity."⁷ In effect, Marx claims, man has created a society in which he is disconnected from nature – in fact, his

⁷ Marx, K. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. (Progress Publishers, 1844), 328-331.

systems directly harm planetary health - yet is inextricably bound to its systems for continued survival.

This alarming existential dilemma is epitomized by the emergence of the Anthropocene, a concept first explored by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who proclaimed “human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature...and are pushing the earth into planetary *terra incognita*.”⁸ The Anthropocene - the origin of which ostensibly began with the Industrial Revolution, circa 1800 - is an epoch brought about by the negative planetary effects of human industry. However, the underlying principle of cosmicism – that the universe is totally indifferent to mankind’s existence – inverts this assumption by shifting perspective from that of humanity’s to that of nature’s. In *The Last Messiah*, philosopher Peter Zapffe expands upon Marx’s dialectical materialism while subverting the dire implications of the Anthropocene, proclaiming “[humanity] can discern the outline of his biológico-cosmic terms: he is the universe’s helpless captive.”⁹

Seen through the lens of nature, it is humanity’s survival which is at the mercy of natural forces, rather than nature being jeopardized by the destructive industries of mankind - for humanity is dependent upon nature and not vice versa. Philosopher Eugene Thacker, one of Zapffe’s contemporaries, summarizes this terrestrial perspective by stating “whether we can ‘save’ the planet is one question – whether the planet needs saving is another.”¹⁰ Thomas Ligotti further delineates the human arrogance implicit in environmentalist mottos such as “Save the Planet,” noting “if we vanished tomorrow, no organism on this planet would miss

⁸ Crutzen, Paul, Steffen, Will, & McNeill, John. *The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?* (US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, 2000), 614.

⁹ Zapffe Peter. *The Last Messiah*. (Janus, 1933), 4-5.

¹⁰ Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 1. (Zero, 2011), 9.

us...nothing in nature needs us.”¹¹ In “Infestatio Natura,” principles behind Marx’s dialectical materialism and those related to cosmic indifference are visually described; nature is not only depicted as interwoven with humanity, as “man’s inorganic body,” but has in fact *infected* man’s very being, metastasized into flesh like an inescapable disease. Natural forms are intertwined with human forms, and regardless of humanity’s negative impact on the planet, that impact is thus proven as ultimately temporary – for, given enough time, nature will inevitably infiltrate and consume not only mortal, transient human bodies, but all of human civilization itself.

Confrontations with the Supernatural

In addition to describing man’s position within the natural world, cosmic indifference/cosmicism concerns man’s dynamic interaction with the supernatural: forces and entities which exist beyond the scope of human knowledge or comprehension. With my multimedia work, I construct imaginary, inhuman figures and objects which reference not only the unknown, but the inherently *unknowable*.



(“Foreign Digestive Tract” (painted insulation foam, crystals, LEDs, painted map, 6”x8”, 2018)
“Ancient Relics of Unknown Origin” (ceramic figures, glass vessels, felt-lined box, 12”x24”, 2018))

¹¹ Ligotti, Thomas. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. (Hippocampus Press, 2010), 231.

My sculpture “Foreign Digestive Tract” and assemblage “Ancient Relics of Unknown Origin” both feature iconography stripped of human understanding. “Foreign Digestive Tract” bears the semblance of human intestines, though suspended in an unrecognizable body cavity, and its neon coloring, as well as unnatural glow and texture all work to connote an alien/otherworldly genesis and function. “Ancient Relics of Unknown Origin” features a tableau of organic-looking figurines encased in small vitrines similar to reliquaries; the gold adornment and red velvet enclosure reference Catholic and Jewish holy vessels. These objects are devoid of context or labeling; thus, their meaning and symbolism are inherently unknowable. These remotely recognizable, yet ultimately unfathomable pieces explore a vital principle of cosmic indifference: the notion that humanity is not simply insignificant within the greater cosmic spectrum, as theorized by Lovecraft as well as Zapffe and his colleagues, but pitifully incapable of rationally processing confrontations with supernatural forces and cosmic entities.

Lovecraft’s seminal short story *Call of Cthulhu* begins with a narration summarizing this notion: “the most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents...some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein.”¹² In Lovecraft’s mythos, inhuman entities known as the “Elder Gods,” epitomized by the immortal Cthulhu, exist beyond the realm of human understanding; humanity is blissfully ignorant not only in lack of knowledge of such entities, but in utter lack of comprehension. In his personal letters, Lovecraft expounds: “my tales are based on the fundamental premise that human laws and interests have no validity in the cosmos-at-large...when we cross the line to the boundless

¹² Lovecraft, H.P. *Call of Cthulhu*. (Weird Tales, 1928), 1.

unknown, we must remember to leave our humanity at the threshold.”¹³ These sentiments invoke a necessary humility regarding humanity’s connection to both nature and the supernatural; man has no right claiming any position of supposed superiority, as his basic faculties of perception, and thus ultimate understanding, remain woefully insufficient.

In his article *Loving the Alien*, writer Michael Clune examines the positive side effect of human humility born from such cosmic ignorance, noting the importance of cosmic indifference as a pathway towards decentering human beings from supposed planetary authority: “being less anthropomorphic will enable us to care for the environment better...when one truly sees the world inhumanly, there *is* no environment.”¹⁴ Clune believes that the process of “inhumanizing” the world, or perceiving existence without an anthropomorphic lens, negates knowledge of even the concept of an “environment”; instead, humanity would exist as a seamless, uninterrupted aspect of the natural world, with no imbued self-separation or even self-identity. Clune’s proposition, supported by Lovecraft’s writing, represents the antithesis of Marx’s dialectical materialism; lacking an anthropomorphic lens, mankind ceases to exist as a concept separated from nature/supernature, which is all-encompassing and consuming.

In conceptualizing my cosmic horror-themed “otherworldly” artwork, it is vital to examine the ethnographical lens, via which the observed subject is referred to as an “other,” with the ultimate goal being “to learn a community’s way of life and reporting the results.”¹⁵ As ethnography has hitherto concerned the exploration and observation of various communities on earth, my cosmicism work represents an examination of the ultimate

¹³ Lovecraft, H.P. *Selected Letters Vol. 2*. (Arkham House Publishers, 1968), (Farnsworth Letter).

¹⁴ Clune, Michael. *Loving the Alien: Thomas Ligotti and the Psychology of Cosmic Horror*. LA Review, 2016.

¹⁵ Iphofen, Ron. *Research Ethics in Ethnography & Anthropology*. (European Commission, 2015), 6-7.

ethnographic “other”: that of an extraterrestrial civilization. In his *Anthropology*, Immanuel Kant examines the philosophical challenge in describing an extraterrestrial civilization, as description unbound by human language or definition is theoretically impossible, claiming “in order to sketch the character of a certain species, it is necessary that the species be compared with...other species already known to us.”¹⁶ My ceramic work “The Pleiadian Nativity” and painted found-object “Andromedan Zodiac Globe” are both informed by Kant’s position regarding the depiction of alien civilization and its constituents.



((“The Pleiadian Nativity” (hand-painted terra cotta figurines, projection, lights, 24”x18”, 2017) “Andromedan Zodiac Globe” (hand-painted globe, globe stand, gold-leafed gemstones, 18”x48”, 2017))

Although both of these pieces depict unknown alien entities – including creatures with tentacle limbs, and cyclopean beings with hooves and branching faces - the aesthetics displayed, and objects themselves, are analogous to human historical art objects and mediums. For example, “The Pleiadian Nativity” is inspired by traditional Christian nativity scenes, with baby Jesus displaced by a writhing, Cthulhu-inspired mass of tentacles; “Andromedan Zodiac Globe” is a re-contextualized Rand-McNally celestial globe, with

¹⁶ Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. (The Hague, 1785), 390-417.

corresponding constellations depicting alien creatures labeled in unfamiliar, otherworldly writing. In referencing traditional, recognizably human objects, my “alien” art serves Clune’s humbling intention of decentering humanity, offering the viewer a glimpse into an otherworldly mirror by reflecting a parallel-world of analogous foreign objects. In doing so, accepted human systems of belief such as Christianity or astrology are called suddenly into question; by presenting doppelgängers of inhuman origin, man’s presumed originality and authority becomes precariously unhinged.

Thesis Exhibition & Experimental Film

My thesis exhibition “Strange Aeons” synthesizes work depicting these confrontations between humanity and both nature and supernature, united by humanity’s insignificance relative to these forces. My exhibition title originates from a couplet in Lovecraft’s early short story *The Nameless City*: “that is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons, even death may die.”¹⁷ This couplet, which in the context of the story is sung by a poet who goes mad upon receiving visions of the eponymous inhuman city, is purposefully, ominously cryptic. Lovecraft’s mythos hinges upon the dominion of previously described immortal “Elder Gods,” for whom the concept of death is similar to that of a dream; the “strange aeons” refer to a far-future epoch in which humanity has long expired, or else been mutated beyond recognition, and in which only the Elder Gods remain – a time in which the concept of death has itself ceased to exist.¹⁸ The crux of my thesis exhibition rests upon Lovecraft’s notion: imagining what environs and entities might populate such strange aeons of the distant, transfigured future.

¹⁷ Lovecraft, H.P. *The Nameless City*. (The Wolverine, 1921), 3-5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 3-5.

Although my natural and supernatural-themed thesis works both relate to cosmic indifference, they are strikingly different both aesthetically and in genesis. My natural infestation work is comprised of recognizably terrestrial, found organic elements in sculptural work, or in representational flat natural imagery for collage, while my extraterrestrial/supernatural work contains artificial elements including insulation foam, LEDs, and projected digital video. My thesis exhibition will display a fluid progression from natural-themed to supernatural-themed work, culminating in completely alien pieces inherent to my imagined “strange aeons.”



(still image from “Babalon Reworking,” experimental film, (11 minutes), 2017-18)

My experimental short film “Babalon Reworking” is the primary thesis work bridging the divide between my depicted natural and supernatural confrontations. The film draws its title from a series of Occult rituals known as “Babalon Working,” performed in 1946 by NASA scientist (and Jet Propulsion Lab founder) Jack Parsons and his wife Marjorie, concerning the manifestation of the ancient Sumerian goddess Babalon.¹⁹ The principal

¹⁹ Staley, Michael. *The Babalon Working*. (Starfire, 1989), 1.

philosophy behind the ceremony (and supposed summoning or incarnation of Babalon) deals with symbolic energy transference; Parsons and his compatriots believed the current era of mankind to be dominated by destructive, violent forces representative of the Egyptian god Horus, while the older Sumerian goddess Babalon is epitomized by positive energies of “love, understanding, and Dionysian freedom.”²⁰ By resurrecting the life force of Babalon via sexual and ritual magic, Parsons and his wife thus hoped to help positively transform and heal the much-aggrieved planetary consciousness.

“Babalon Reworking” features a bombardment of natural and supernatural imagery, surreal physical environments, and manipulated found footage and audio, all of which centers around a hooded priestess performing a series of rituals related to the genesis of a Babalon-esque cosmic entity. Over the course of the film the priestess gathers anatomical elements, including intestines and a brain, in order to construct the cosmic entity before imbuing it with life.



(still image from “Babalon Reworking,” experimental film, (11 minutes), 2017-18)

²⁰ Parsons, J. *The Book of Babalon: The Collected Writings of Jack Parsons*. (Liber, 1946), 1.

The priestess protagonist embodies the merging of the natural and supernatural in pursuit of magical creation; she conducts her rituals in natural environs, including a forest and a cave, as well as a laboratory filled with whirring machinery and artificial lights, and utilizes natural elements such as seeds and flora alongside scientific instruments including oscilloscopes and cell counters. In the film's climax, the priestess's rituals reach a psychedelic crescendo, featuring superimpositions of terrestrial and extraterrestrial imagery alongside juxtaposed footage of macrocosmic earth/outer space animations and microcosmic bacterial/mold growth time-lapses. "Babalon Working" will be screened on loop in the center of the exhibition space, serving as a focal point between thematic worlds.

Transcending Normative Art Spectatorship

"Babalon Working" was filmed entirely on location at HEALER, an alternative art venue I co-founded in 2016, and showcases immersive, interactive installations I constructed in the space. As with my collages, sculptural assemblages, and experimental films, my installation work is informed by principles of dialectical phenomenology, and conveys these ideas at a desired experiential apex. Due to its multimedia nature, my thesis exhibition itself is a kind of culminating installation, comprised of figurative sculptures, collages, assemblages, and a central experimental film with accompanying ambient sound.

In Robert Hobbs' *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Installation Art*, Hobbs discusses the heightened sensory awareness a viewer undergoes when encountering installations, noting "in installation art, the role of the viewer is enhanced as never before."²¹ Hobbs maintains that installation art, existing as "a collaborative proposition between artist

²¹ Hobbs, Robert. *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Installation Art*. (U. Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 20-21.

and material,” enables visitors to transcend the traditional spectator role of “looking” into “a dynamic and ongoing pursuit.”²² The evolving role of the viewer/visitor, from that of passive observation (dubbed “acting intentionality”) to active engagement (dubbed “operative intentionality”), is essential to philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s revelation described in his *Phenomenology of Perception*: “the world is not what I think, but what I live through.”²³ Merleau-Ponty muses on the symbiotic nature of observation between not only viewer and art, but between creator and that which is created; “operative intentionality” is thus a two-way mirror of sorts, wherein the artwork gazes back at the viewer in addition to being gazed upon.

“It is the mountain itself which makes itself seen by the painter,”²⁴ Merleau-Ponty declares, a sentiment echoed by painter Paul Cezanne, who once famously said “I have felt that it was not I who looked at the forest...the trees were looking at me.”²⁵ These existential breakdowns between creator and that which is created, as well as between art and spectator, are crucial to my desired affectation with my work, and perhaps the key to describing Edmund Husserl’s “essence of consciousness.” The end-game of operative intentionality is reciprocity, whereby, through sensory overload and transfixed gaze, the viewer transcends passive observation and becomes actively engaged, intrinsically bound to the art experience surrounding them.

Ultimately my thesis exhibition is concerned with this viewer transformation, unsettling and seducing my viewers via glimpses of strange aeons at turns intimately terrestrial and exceedingly alien, hauntingly disturbing and hypnotically familiar. My tools of

²² *Ibid*, 20-22.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Editions Gallimard, (Routledge, 1945), xviii.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 26.

²⁵ NicholSEN, Sherry. *The Love of Nature and the End of the World*. (MIT Press, 2003), 69.

visual communication are ever-sharpened by the fervent need to impress upon humanity vital themes of cosmic indifference and the ever-devouring totality of nature, in this rapidly evolving age of the Anthropocene wherein human industry has direct and dire consequences on planetary health, and our species yet rages ever onwards, approaching inevitable terminus. There is vital truth to the maxim that art must be a mirror held up to society's face; via an array of resources and methodologies, my thesis work seeks to transfix my viewer as all those staring trees once transfixed Cezanne. My profound and utmost hope is that when you stare into the soul of my art, my art will stare back fiercely into your soul.

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